

Sowell House
Scottsville
Albemarle County
Virginia

HABS No. VA-1016

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SOWELL HOUSE

HABS No. VA-1016

Location: Scottsville, Albemarle County, Virginia.

Present Owner: Lynwood Truman Gibson.

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Present Use: Storage.

Significance: The Sowell House is an example of a vernacular structure which evolved in three stages. Beginning as a one bay, single pile, story-and-a-half structure, the dwelling was modified to a three bay, hall and parlor form, finally, to a double pile saltbox.

Historical Information

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: In 1734 Thomas Sowell received a crown grant for 550 acres west of the southern end of Carter's Mountain.¹ Thomas and his wife, Martha, settled on their grant and raised a family of eight. Upon Thomas Sowell's death in 1763, the land passed to his son, John. John and his wife, Martha Harris, had seven children, Thomas, Benjamin, Ellijah, Elisha, Edmond, Keziah and Betsey. Before John Sowell's death in October of 1837, he sold a number of parcels from the original grant to his sons. Among these sales was 100 acres "on the waters of the Hardware and west side of Carter's Mountain" to his son, Elisha in October of 1814.²

John Sowell's son, Benjamin, a surveyor, succeeded his father as owner of the family homestead. In February of 1796, Benjamin married Annie Gentry. Their children include, Pleasant, born January 15, 1797; Martha, born January 18, 1800; Lewis, December 29, 1803; Elizabeth, April 8, 1806; Nimrod, January 16, 1808; Kitty, October 24, 1809; and Mary, June 30, 1811.

The eldest of Benjamin and Annie Sowell's children, Pleasant was a furniture and coffin maker by profession. In September, 1822 Pleasant purchased 100 acres from Elisha Sowell for \$1500.00. This land was the same parcel Elisha purchased from John Sowell in 1814. On this tract Pleasant erected a furniture factory near a branch of the Hardware River known as Sowell's Creek. He also began the construction of the Sowell House on the knoll overlooking the stream.

On December 15, 1824 Pleasant married Sarah Garland. Sarah and Pleasant Sowell had one child, Maria Elizabeth, born October 19, 1825. Marie Elizabeth married Albert Horatio Cleveland in September of 1847. Marie Elizabeth Sowell Cleveland died in January of 1850. Surviving her was a daughter, Sarah Helen, born February 3, 1849. Sarah Cleveland married

John Carr Maddox in September of 1872.

Upon his death in 1875, Pleasant Sowell willed his holdings, including the Sowell House, to his grand-daughter, Sarah Helen Cleveland Maddox. Sarah Maddox, in turn, transferred title to 20 acres, including the Sowell House, to William Truman Gibson, husband of her daughter, Nora Elizabeth. This transfer occurred in September of 1929. Following her death in March, 1935, the remainder of Sarah Maddox's land holdings were divided among her surviving children. Between 1939 and 1940, Nora Elizabeth Gibson succeeded in gaining title to 140.4 acres of Pleasant Sowell's holdings from the other heirs to Sarah Maddox's estate. The present owner of the Sowell Property, Lynwood Truman Gibson, inherited the house and land from his mother, Nora Elizabeth Gibson.

The Sowell House was actively used as a residence by four generations of the Sowell family beginning with Pleasant Sowell and ending with the Maddox children. The present owner, Lynwood Truman Gibson maintains the property for storage.

Footnotes

1

A copy of the original crown grant appears in Appendix I.

2

Deedbook 19, page 130, 25 August, 1814.

2. Alterations and additions: The Sowell House was constructed in three stages. Originally a one bay, single pile story-and-a-half structure, (N) c. 1822, the dwelling was modified to a three bay hall and parlor form, c. 1830. A three room saltbox addition located to the rear (E) of the building, c. 1840, completed the house as it stands today. In addition to the three major building stages which can be documented through structural evidence, a fourth addition can be documented photographically. This addition is a single bay, one story kitchen addition adjoining the north wall of the parlor. This shed roof addition has been dated c. 1880 by the present owner and was extant to at least c. 1920, the date of the last available photograph. An open post, hipped roof porch was once located adjacent to the principal entrance on the west elevation. Photographic evidence reveals a 10 step, open stair rising to the first floor entrance. Railings with open balustrades appear to have spanned the two supporting piers flanking each side of this stair.

The first major alteration to the structure's original fabric appears to have occurred in the 1940's. At this time the original shake roof was replaced with the present one foot tin panels and a number of original weatherboards replaced. In the 1970's the present owner rebuilt the saltbox addition. This rebuilding included the entire east exterior wall and altered the original four bay composition to three bay. Interior alterations at this time include the introduction of redwood framing, often superimposed upon original fabric. Weatherboarding on the east, south and north elevations were also replaced and the free-standing stack of the south, exterior end chimney rebuilt. The brick stack of this chimney was repointed using portland cement.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: Three photographs dating from the first quarter of the twentieth century were found in Gibson family documents. Copies of these photographs appear with the illustrations to this brochure.

2. Bibliography:

Gibson Family Bibles.

Tax Records* in possession of Lywood Truman Gibson.

Thomas Thacker, Sowell Family History, (Unpublished), 1934.

The Reverend Edgar Woods, History of Albemarle, (Bridgewater, Virginia, 1932),

Architectural Information

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This structure is an interesting example of a vernacular building evolving in three stages. Beginning as a one bay, single pile, story-and-a-half structure, the dwelling was modified to a three bay, hall and parlor plan and finally, to a double pile saltbox.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair; structural system appears sound, however, much of the interior finish is damaged or missing.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The house is nearly square; 28'-3" wide and 27'-0" deep. The west(front) elevation is 25'-0" to the peak and it is 19'-2" from the ground to the peak on the east (catslide) elevation.
2. Foundations: Stone, roughly squared, dry wall.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Weatherboards, the originals, approximately six inches to the weather with a one inch bead, remain on the upper portions of the north, south and west elevations only; the remainder of the weatherboards have been replaced periodically. There is a simple box cornice on the west facade. The house is presently painted a sea-green color, but displays evidence of having been white washed at one time.
4. Structural system: Wood frame; oldest sections, i.e. rafters, are pinned mortise and tenon joints while the newer sections incorporate nails.
5. Porches: Front porch no longer extant.
6. Chimneys: Two exterior end chimneys; the north end

has a straight cut stone chimney of the same material as the foundation; the south wall has a brick chimney laid up in varying bond with weatherings.

7. Openings:

- a. Doors: The main door has six sunken panels and a simple architrave of two half-round moldings. The north door is similar, but with only four panels and without the moldings. The east door and the two basement doors are constructed of beaded vertical planks.
- b. Windows: First floor windows are wooden, double-hung with six over six light sash except on the east facade where the windows have been rebuilt with no sash installed. The two basement windows have six light wooden sash and stone lintels. The north basement window retains the holes where horizontal wooden dowels were once inserted. Second floor windows are four light wooden sash nailed in place. A singular window in the catslide has no sash.

8. Roof: Gable with catslide, tin paneling has replaced original shake roof covering.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

- a. Basement: Two room cellar below original hall and parlor. The north room was once the kitchen, the south room a root cellar. They are divided by a partition of horizontal flush-board paneling. There is a crawl space beneath the catslide addition.
- b. First floor: The early single pile, hall and parlor plan has a central main entrance and an exterior door from the parlor adjacent to the chimney. The saltbox addition, nine inches lower than the main house, has three rooms; a large central "porch" with two smaller flanking rooms. The stairs are centrally located to the rear of the hall.

- c. Second floor: Two chambers with a central stair and a deep closet opposite the staircase. Saltbox area is unfinished, with exposed floor joists.
2. Stairways: There are two stairways, both are simple quarter turns with landings and no handrails, set between walls. The basement stairs have open stringers, while the main stair is closed and has a door at the landing. Beneath the landing is a "milk closet" accessible from the "porch". Both staircases display evidence of having been changed.
3. Flooring: All finished rooms on the first and second floors have tongue and groove, heart pine floorboards of random width, averaging six inches. The basement kitchen has a cut fieldstone floor and the root cellar has a dirt floor.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The hall and parlor are finished with painted horsehair plaster. The stone walls of the basement rooms have a thin layer of plaster and the ceilings are exposed joists. The finish in each of the first floor saltbox rooms differs. The northeast room, recently rebuilt, has new floor joists except for one longer original joist. The north and east walls of the room have been completely rebuilt with exposed studs and bracing. The south and west walls remain intact with plaster finish, chair rail and baseboard. The ceiling is open to the second floor joists. The central room in the saltbox, the "porch", has been rebuilt on the east side and remains unfinished. The remainder of the walls and the ceiling are finished with whitewashed pine horizontal flush-board panels eight to eleven inches in width. In the southeast room only the west wall remains intact with plaster finish, baseboard and chair rail; the remaining walls are covered with random width lath, varying in width from one-half inch to two inches. The ceiling is also open to the second floor. On the second floor, the common rafter system is evident in the south chamber. Of note, are the notches found in a number of the rafters, probably once for collar beams. The north and east

partitions of the south chamber are of horizontal panels of natural finish. The north chamber has walls and ceiling covered in whitewashed horizontal panels. The north stairwell wall is finished with lapped exterior weatherboarding.

5. Doorways and doors: There are two types of doors and two kinds of door architraves used in the Sowell House, although not necessarily together. All three doors in the hall have a refined surround with two beads and a cyma. The remainder of the doors in the house have a simple rectilinear architrave or a combination of the bead and cyma with the simple rectilinear. All first floor doors are four panel except for the east exterior door, which is a whitewashed vertical four plank with three chamfered cross-bars; and the door leading from the hall to the basement which is similar except for a natural wood finish. Similar plank doors with simple architraves are found on the second floor.
6. Trim: The hall, northeast and southeast rooms have a beaded chair rail and baseboard. The parlor also has a baseboard and chair rail but of a slightly less sophisticated design.
7. Hardware: Door hardware varies from wooden hinges used on the kitchen door and the basement door from the first floor to simple iron strap hinges on most doors. The north chamber door has iron H and L hinges. A few iron box locks remain as well as a few porcelain handles. A few rose-headed nails have been used throughout various sections. Of note is a large iron hook in the hall ceiling, installed (according to owner) about 1890.
8. Heating: The kitchen fireplace, flush with the stone wall has an eighteen inch high stone lintel. At one point this fireplace was refitted for a stove and has two kinds of brick infill and an iron lintel. The parlor fireplace, of fieldstone, was once plastered over. The mantelpiece is simple with a shelf and brick hearth. Above it on the second floor an equally simple mantle with stone hearth was once converted to a stove. The brick chimney serves only the first floor hall. The mantle is of a Greek Revival type with breakfront shelf

and a hearth of brick covered with a soft stone.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces west on Route 20, located between the fork of Sowell Creek and another, nameless stream at the foot of Carter's Mountain. There is a trace of a short dirt drive to the south, adjacent to the house and 100 acres surrounded by a post and wire fence.
2. Out buildings: No outbuildings are intact. The remainder of the stone chimney for a slave quarters can be found southeast of the house and further out, the subterranean stone foundation of an ice house.

PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are part of a project undertaken by the University of Virginia, School of Architecture, under the direction of K. Edward Lay, Associate Professor of Architecture. The records were prepared during the Fall Semester, 1979 by Martha Crabill and Kathryn Kuranda, graduate students in architectural history. The documentation was not produced under HABS supervision, nor edited by members of the HABS staff. The material was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey.